

ENGLISH FILM CLUB

2020/21



41st SEASON

Chiasso, Cinema EXCELSIOR

18.15

Friday, 29th January 2021

OFFICIAL SECRETS

2019

112 minutes

Directed by **Gavin Hood**

Starring: Kiera Knightley, Matt Smith, Rhys Ifans

Official Secrets tells the true story of whistle-blower Katharine Gun, a translator working for the British security services at the GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters) surveillance unit in Cheltenham. During the immediate run-up to the 2003 Iraq invasion, she receives a truly disturbing top secret NSA memo. The United States government wants help from GCHQ to make the case for war in Iraq. The United States government has not found WMDs, (Weapons of Mass Destruction), and the US is enlisting Britain's help in a joint US-UK illegal spying operation collecting compromising information on six U.N. Security Council members to potentially blackmail them into voting in favour of an invasion of Iraq.

Gun makes the gut-wrenching decision to defy her government and leak the memo to the press, a definite violation of the Official Secrets Act.

Unable to stand by and watch the world be rushed into war and at great personal and professional risk, journalist Martin Bright published the leaked document in The Observer newspaper in London, and the story made headlines around the world. Members of the Security Council were outraged, and any chance of a UN resolution in favour of war collapsed. But within days, Bush declared he no longer needed UN backing and invaded anyway.

As Iraq descended into chaos, Katharine was arrested and charged with breaching the Official Secrets Act. Martin faced potential charges too. Their legal battles exposed the highest levels of government in both London and Washington with having manipulated intelligence in order to sell an illegal war.

Critics' comments:

Their efforts did not prevent the invasion, and so suspense arises from the personal peril Gun and her husband experience as she's targeted for violating the Official Secrets Act. It's in this half of the picture where Knightley shines brightest in a performance that balances conviction and soul baring and is all the more genuine for its lack of showiness.

(Andrea Gronvall, *Chicago Reader*)

All of this happened; as far as I can glean, the movie is unusually accurate. That may be the influence of its South-African born director Gavin Hood, who has a strong track record with this kind of torn-from-recent-history material. His 2005 film *Tsotsi* was acutely sharp about the problems of crime in the new South Africa. His work here is understated: the film builds quietly but inexorably. All of the characters appear to have their correct names, even the ones you want to boo. (Paul Byrnes, *The Sydney Morning Herald*)

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